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Plan has GIs aiding contras

By George de Lama
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WASHINGTON—President Reagan has approved a secret plan to use U.S. military personnel as advisers for Nicaraguan contras if Congress passes his proposal to send \$100 million in aid to the guerrillas, according to informed government sources.

But even if the military aid is approved, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimates it would take at least 18 months to 2 years to arm, train and reorganize the contras to convert them into a capable opponent for Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista army, the sources said.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said Friday the American advisers in Honduras are "training only American troops" and "as far as I know they are not involved in training any contras."

Asked if they could do so if Congress approves Reagan's request for \$100 million in aid for the contras, Speakes said: "There are no specific plans to do that. If it was done, it would be very, very few in number."

However, he added, "There is no option that I am aware of on that until the legislation is approved." If it is approved, he said, "we don't know" whether there would be training of guerrillas. He said it was "not necessarily" the President's view that such training was needed.

The Central Intelligence Agency and the DIA developed the plan to use U.S. personnel to advise and train the contras, then last month sent their recommendation to the White House, where it was approved by Reagan, said the sources, who spoke on condition they not be identified.

The proposal, in the classified portion of Reagan's aid request, calls for the use of U.S. military logistics personnel to show the

contras how to set up and administer their supply system" and does not intend to place American forces in the battlefield, the sources said.

As the battle in Congress over Reagan's request for aid to the rebels approaches a climax, plans to introduce U.S. military trainers are likely to add to the controversy by raising questions about the increased risks of American casualties or an eventual U.S. combat role in Nicaragua.

Although U.S. military would not accompany the rebels into Nicaragua under the plan, American troops in Honduras would act as advisers on tactics and strategy. "They want to help them [the contras] be able to sustain an operation," one source said.

In a newspaper interview released by the White House Thursday, the President confirmed that his proposal to aid the contras includes a request for use of CIA contingency funds, explaining that the money could help the U.S. "offer training" and "help with military planning" for the contras.

Under restrictions that have already been put on us by Congress, we can't give advice, we can't offer training, we can't exchange intelligence information with the contras," Reagan told the Baltimore Sun. "We feel that if we're going to help them with weapons and arms that we ought to be freed of those restrictions and allowed to provide this other assistance to them."

Despite Reagan's assertion, it was learned that the Pentagon and the CIA have been quietly providing the contras with up-to-date intelligence reports on Sandinista military activities. In particular, U.S. intelligence has kept them informed on the movements of the formidable Soviet-built Mi-24 "Hind" helicopter gunships.

Administration officials have publicly and privately insisted that the use of U.S. military force is not under active consideration, and the top U.S. commander in Central America, Gen. John Galvin, testified to Congress last week that he would oppose introducing U.S. combat troops into the region.

Yet accounts of internal administration assessments of the contras portray the rebels as a stagnant and ineffective force with little prospect of immediate success, struggling for their survival and dependent on increased U.S. aid.

A report released last week by the Democratic-controlled House Intelligence Committee said that "it continues to be the assessment of the U.S. intelligence community that only U.S. forces could truly resolve the conflict in Nicaragua on a military basis."

One secret administration estimate showed that the \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid appropriated for the contras last year has gone largely toward sustaining a vast expatriate community in Honduras and smaller communities in Costa Rica.

This analysis estimated there are 15,000 to 20,000 armed but inactive rebels among the 40,000 to 50,000 men, women and children supported by the U.S. aid.

By one government estimate, only about \$17 million in aid has reached these communities, an official familiar with the contra effort said.

Tons of supplies allocated by Congress last year had sat for months in warehouses in Miami and New Orleans, blocked from delivery by Honduran officials. The issue sparked a congressional inquiry last week after the General Accounting Office issued a report condemning the State Department's accounting and auditing procedures for the aid money.

But about \$10 million worth of boots, uniforms, medicine and other forms of assistance have been shipped to the rebels over the last two weeks, the sources said. The final \$10 million from last year's aid package has not yet been spent.

For allowing the U.S. aid to come into their country and move on to contra base camps located there, some Honduran military authorities were reported to have pocketed some of the money by converting it into cheap Honduran currency on the local black market and keeping the 35 to 40 percent difference from the official exchange rate, U.S. sources said.

Although Reagan and top administration officials have contended that the nearly fourfold increase in aid sought for the contras this year would help them expand their forces, some experts fear that it also would swell the ranks of impoverished relatives and hangers-on who flock near the contra base camps for food and medicine.

Moreover, some administration officials also expect Honduran authorities to step up their pressure for increased U.S. military and economic aid in return for their cooperation in letting the contra aid get through.